

In Search of Sienkiewicz's Zagłoba: Clues From Genealogy Records

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Jan Onufy Zagłoba is a beloved fictional character with a legendary fondness for drink who appears frequently in Nobel Laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz's historical novels. Zagłoba has been said to be a cross between Homer's Ulysses and Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff because of his propensity for drinking and exaggerated tales of his youthful adventures. He is portrayed as a lover of food and wine, and a great braggart. The world renowned stage actress, Helena Modjeska (Modrzejewska), a close friend of Sienkiewicz, and various other sources, assert that Zagłoba was based on the person of **Captain Rudolf Antoni Józef Korwin Piotrowski** (1813-1883) (Modjeska, Helena. *Memories and Impressions of Helena Modjeska. An Autobiography*. New York: The MacMillan Co., 1910, p. 282; Miłosz, Czesław. *The History of Polish Literature*. Berkeley:

UC Press, 1969, pp. 309-310).

Thus, it appears that the loveable Zagłoba was a portrait of a real-life character who, after fighting in the Polish Uprising of 1830-31, found his way to France and later to California. "It is... generally accepted that Jan Zagłoba, the Polish Falstaff and one of the most memorable characters in all of Polish literature, is based on the person of Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski, a seventy-five-year old émigré [*editor: he died at 70*] and eccentric, whom Sienkiewicz met in San Francisco" noted Konstantin Symmons-Symonolewicz (Thomas Napierkowski, "Sienkiewicz in America: 1876 and 1991," *Polish American Studies*, vol. 49, 1992, pp. 45-55).

Much has been written about Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski – in Polish, French and English. By all accounts he had a great fondness for "wine, women and song" (Modjeska, *Memories and Impressions*, p. 287). He loved a bawdy joke, had a great sense of humor, and an eye for the ladies. With it all, he had courtly manners that befitted his role as warrior, civic activist in his adopted country, and as an educated Polish patriot who habitually sided with the cause of liberty for all peoples (Modjeska, *Memories and Impressions*, p. 307; *Polish Pioneers of California*, Chicago: Polish Roman Catholic Union of America, 1940, p. 74; Robert Bielecki, *Słownik biograficzny oficerów powstania listopadowego*, vol. II, p. 297). Modjeska personally knew Piotrowski and she gave him a collection of her books as a donation for The Society of Poles in America (Edward J. Wheeler, ed., *Current Literature*, New York: The Current Literature Publishing Co., vol. 46, January 1909, p. 668). "Author Met 'Zagłoba' in San Francisco" proclaimed *The San Francisco Call* (22 March 1907), referring to Sienkiewicz.

BERKELEY, March 21.—Professor Charles Mills Gayley informed his class in English at the university today that one of the most prominent characters in Sienkiewicz's novels—"Zagłoba"—was met by the Polish author in San Francisco and there inspired Sienkiewicz with the idea of embodying his characteristics in the person of Zagłoba. The man figures in three of the Polish writer's stories, "With Fire and Sword," "The Deluge" and "Pan Michael."

We can trace the movements of Piotrowski through genealogic records (immigration documents, vital statistics and census records, newspaper articles, and City Directories) (see links at the end of this article). From these we learn Piotrowski's birth date, that he married Marguerite Eulalie Martin de Chambaud on the 2nd of January 1839 in Agonges, France, and that he had five children there, Eugene, Władysław (Ladislaus) who died in 1841 at the age of 18 months, Adelaide (who died October 14, 1850), Angelina

Josephine Marie Stéphanie born in 1842, and Angelina Adelaide Zenaide Piotrowska who died in 1850. In 1844 Marguerite died. Angelina Josephine grew up to marry French engineer Michel Auguste Léon de Saint-André. The Saint André family had three daughters -- Suzanne, Yvonne, and Marie. Rudolf's granddaughter, Suzanne married Léon Eugene Ernest Leps (of Rochefort) (*Revue de Saintonge & d'Aunis: Bulletin de la Société des archives ...*, Volume 16, 1896). Yvonne Marie Amelie de Saint-André, granddaughter #2, was born in 1872 in Saintes, France. She married Captain Léon Auguste Bauche, son of August Nicolas Blauche (Ancestry.com). (Piotrowski's sister [editor: niece], Pelagia, married the famed Jarosław Dąbrowski; *Daily Alta*, Volume 17, Number 5680, 24 September 1865; RK Piotrowski's sister Stefania married Władysław Cichorski.) Granddaughter Marie married Marie Pierre Diard (*Revue de Saintonge & d'Aunis: Bulletin de la Société des archives ...*, Volume 19, 1899).

Adelaide and Angelina Josephine Marie Stéphanie were left in France (presumably with their French grandparents) when Rudolf departed for New Orleans in 1846. In New Orleans Piotrowski established "The Polish Committee" to raise money for the 1846 Polish Uprising. A year later he was fundraising in Washington D.C. Piotrowski made his way to California in 1849 through Iowa, Nebraska and Northern Colorado. During the trek he married (according to some reports) a very young English woman, Angela Lillian Norris [see *Lillian Morris* by H. Sienkiewicz], who died *en route* to California (*Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. xxvi, pp. 501-503) [NOTE: this is most probably a *fictional marriage*, based on a Sienkiewicz story]. We can establish the particulars of Rudolf's birth and parentage (17 April 1813, or 1814); born in Kamień, near Lublin; his father, Antoni, was a Polish officer, and so on). Piotrowski's life is summarized in the eulogy delivered by his close friend, Aleksander Bednawski, with whom he fought in the Polish Uprising of 1830-31 (*Daily Alta California*, vol. 35, 13 April 1883). Rudolf Piotrowski was a friend of General Włodzimierz Krzyżanowski, Polish-born U.S. Civil War hero who, for a time, ran a saloon in San Francisco (Piotrowski and Krzyżanowski co-signed, as witnesses, when journalist Julian Horain was naturalized).

It is claimed that Rudolf fought in the U.S. Civil War, first as a Captain and then as a Major (*Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. xxvi), but this author found no confirmation of these assertions. He is listed in City Directories during the period that he purportedly served in the Civil War, but, although highly unlikely, it's remotely possible (though Piotrowski was in his 50s at that time and living in California). Piotrowski's "circle" were fellow émigrés of varying backgrounds seeking refuge in California from persecution abroad. Rudolf played a significant role in California history. He was a member of the San Francisco Pioneer Association / Society of California Pioneers (<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nrmelton/argosf.htm>) (*The Argonauts of California*, p. 369). In the 1850s and early 1860s he was living in California's Gold Country.

He can be found in a mining community on the Cosumnes River in Sacramento County (a town he named "Sebastopol" for the allied victory over Russia in the Crimean War; the town no longer exists). There he ran a store with Franciszek Michał Wojciechowski [aka Francis Michel], or Francis Michael, etc.), Sienkiewicz's prototype for the literary character Longinus Podbiłęta, using the surname Korwin or Corwin (Bielecki, *Słownik biograficzny*, vol. II, p. 297; Charles Morley, Charles, ed., *Portrait of America: Letters of Henry Sienkiewicz*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1959, p. 265; *Sacramento Daily Union*, 27 January 1864).

As a designated "Political Agent of the Polish Government on the Pacific Coast" Piotrowski traveled the Western States to raise money for "Polish Aid" or "The Cause of Poland." He worked as a storekeeper in the warehouse division of a customs house in San Francisco. In 1862-3 he and Wojciechowski jointly owned a general store in Sebastopol ("Francis & Co."); the partnership was dissolved in 1864. In 1863 (when he moved from Sebastopol to San Francisco)

Piotrowski was Vice President of the Central Polish Society of the Pacific Coast in San Francisco. In that capacity he spoke at a “Grand Mass Meeting in Favor of Polish Freedom and Nationality” organized in San Francisco to support the January Uprising in Poland (*Daily Alta California*, 23 May 1863, Vol. XV, No. 4837); soon thereafter he co-founded the Polish Society of California (in San Francisco) with his friend Captain Kazimierz Bielawski. He was a naturalized US citizen (1857) and a voter (1866 California Great Register of Voters). Captain Piotrowski claimed as friends two California governors, Newton Booth and Romualdo Pacheco (Polish R.C. Union of America. *Polish Pioneers of California*, 1940, p. 46; Przygoda, J. *Polish Americans in California, 1827-1977*. Polish American Historical Association, California Chapter, 1978). “There is no doubt that Piotrowski was the Captain of Booth’s short story “After Dark” (about prominent Poles in France) (Polish R.C. Union of America. *Polish Pioneers of California*, 1940).

Apparently he was an opera fan. Capt. Corwin Petrowski (sic) affixed his name to a letter addressed to Mme. Stella Bonheur (mezzo-soprano, born 1855), praising her as an “artiste” and requesting she select an opera in which to appear for a “complimentary benefit” (*Daily Alta California*, 12 September 1867). No spouse or children are listed with Rudolf in San Francisco in the 1870 census. By 1872, Rudolf was teaching language at San Francisco’s Healds Business College.

California Governor José Antonio Romualdo Pacheco Jr. (October 31, 1831 – January 23, 1899) appointed Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski as State Commissioner of Immigration in San Francisco in 1873. By 1878 Piotrowski was retired, but he remained active in the Polish Community as an officer of the Polish Society of California, which, by the way, welcomed members of all nationalities and faith traditions supporting the cause of liberty. In the 1870s, Piotrowski corresponded with author Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, a former Lublin schoolmate (see “The Korwin Letters”: <http://cosmopolitanreview.com/the-korwin-letters>).

From the 1880 census we learn that Piotrowski, widower, was living as a roomer with a family. In the early 1880s, shortly before his death, City Directories describe Piotrowski’s profession as “capitalist.” Captain Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski left San Francisco in 1882 (after 33 years in the City) to seek treatment in France from Dr. Ksawery (Xavier) Gałęzowski for his failing eyesight, and there he was reunited with his daughter and presumably met his granddaughters. He made the acquaintance of poet Cyprian K. Norwid at Dom Świętego Kazimierza (St. Casimir’s Home), an institution founded in 1846 by Polish immigrants in Paris (located at 119 rue due Chevaleret); the facility cared for the orphaned, the elderly and the poor (<http://www.korwin-piotrowscy.strefa.pl/rudolf.htm>). It was there that both Piotrowski and Norwid died, three months apart. Rudolf Antoni Józef Korwin Piotrowski passed away on the 21st of February 1883 in Paris. Piotrowski’s obituary mentions that his married daughter was at his bedside at the time of his death in France. Rudolf’s daughter, Angelina Josephine Marie Stéphanie Saint-André, sold her father’s property near the Cosumnes River (purchased in 1875) to the Captain’s good friend “Francis Mitchell” aka Franciszek Michał Wojciechowski in 1884 (*Sacramento Daily Union*, 31 July 1875 and 29 November 1884).

Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski was buried in a pauper’s grave (“fosse commune”) at Old Ivry Cemetery (cimetière parisien d'Ivry) on February 27th, 1883 (44, Avenue de Verdun, Ivry-sur Seine). There is no headstone but the death is noted in the cemetery register (personal communication, Barbara Kłosowicz).

www.polishclubsf.org/Bednawski%20to%20Piotrowski.pdf

www.polishclubsf.org/Piotrowski%20in%20City%20Directories.pdf

www.polishclubsf.org/Newspapers.htm

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